VAFTHRUTHNISMOL

The Ballad of Vafthruthnir

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The Vafthruthnismol follows the Hovamol in the *Codex Regius*. From stanza 20 on it is also included in the *Arnamagnæan Codex*, the first part evidently having appeared on leaf now lost. Snorri quotes eight stanzas of it in the *Prose Edda*, and in his prose text closely paraphrases many others.

The poem is wholly in dialogue form except for a single narrative stanza (stanza 5). After a brief introductory discussion between Othin and his wife, Frigg, concerning the reputed wisdom of the giant Vafthruthnir, Othin, always in quest of wisdom, seeks out the giant, calling himself Gagnrath. The giant immediately insists that they shall demonstrate which is the wiser of the two, and propounds four questions (stanzas 11, 13, 15, and 17), each of which Othin answers. It is then the god's turn to ask, and he begins with a series of twelve numbered questions regarding the origins and past history of life. These Vafthruthnir answers, and Othin asks five more questions, this time referring to what is to follow the destruction of the gods, the last one asking the name of his own slayer. Again Vafthruthnir answers, and Othin finally propounds the unanswerable question: "What spake Othin himself in the ears of his son, ere in the bale-fire he burned?" Vafthruthnir, recognizing his questioner as Othin himself, admits his inferiority in wisdom, and so the contest ends.

The whole poem is essentially encyclopædic in character, and thus was particularly useful to Snorri in his preparation of the *Prose Edda*. The encyclopædic poem with a slight narrative outline seems to have been exceedingly popular; the *Grimnismol* and the much later *Alvissmol* represent different phases of the same type. The *Vafthruthnismol* and *Grimnismol* together, in deed, constitute a fairly complete dictionary of Norse mythology. There has been much discussion as to the probable date of the *Vafthruthnismol*, but it appears to belong to about the same period as the *Voluspo*: in other words, the middle of the tenth century. While there may be a few interpolated passages in the poem as we now have it, it is clearly a united whole, and evidently in relatively good condition.

{p. 69}

Othin spake:
1, "Counsel me, Frigg, for I long to fare,
And Vafthruthnir fain would find;
fit wisdom old with the giant wise
Myself would I seek to match."

Frigg spake:
2. "Heerfather here at home would I keep,
Where the gods together dwell;
Amid all the giants an equal in might
To Vafthruthnir know I none."

Othin spake:
3. "Much have I fared, much have I found.
Much have I got from the gods;
And fain would I know how Vafthruthnir now
Lives in his lofty hall."

Frigg spake:
4. "Safe mayst thou go, safe come again,
And safe be the way thou wendest!
Father of men, let thy mind be keen
When speech with the giant thou seekest."

5. The wisdom then of the giant wise

[1. The phrases "Othin spake," "Frigg spake," etc., appear in abbreviated form in both manuscripts. *Frigg*: Othin's wife; cf. *Voluspo*, 34 and note. *Vafthruthnir* ("the Mighty in Riddles"): nothing is known of this giant beyond what is told in this poem.

2. *Heerfather* ("Father of the Host"): Othin.

3. This single narrative stanza is presumably a later {footnote p. 70} interpolation. *Im*: the name appears to be corrupt, but we know nothing of any son of Vafthruthnir. *Ygg* ("the Terrible"): Othin.]

{p. 70}

Forth did he fare to try;
He found the hall | of the father of Im,
And in forthwith went Ygg.

Othin spake:
6. "Vafthruthnir, hail! | to thy hall am I come,
For thyself I fain would see;
And first would I ask | if wise thou art,
Or, giant, all wisdom hast won."

Vafthruthnir spake:
7. "Who is the man | that speaks to me,
Here in my lofty hall?
Forth from our dwelling | thou never shalt fare,
Unless wiser than I thou art."

Othin spake:
8. "Gagnrath they call me, | and thirsty I come
From a journey hard to thy hall;
Welcome I look for, | for long have I fared,
And gentle greeting, giant."

Vafthruthnir spake:
9. "Why standest thou there | on the floor whilst thou speakest?
A seat shalt thou have in my hall;

[8. *Gagnrath* ("the Gain-Counsellor"): Othin on his travels always assumes a name other than his own.]

{p. 71}

Then soon shall we know | whose knowledge is more,
The guest's or the sage's gray."

Othin spake:
10. "If a poor man reaches | the home of the rich,
Let him wisely speak or be still;
For to him who speaks | with the hard of heart
Will chattering ever work ill."

Vafthruthnir spake:
11. "Speak forth now, Gagnrath, | if there from the floor
Thou wouldst thy wisdom make known:
What name has the steed | that each morn anew
The day for mankind doth draw?"

Othin spake:
12. "Skinfaxi is he, | the steed who for men
The glittering day doth draw;
The best of horses | to heroes he seems,
And brightly his mane doth burn."

Vafthruthnir spake:
13. "Speak forth now, Gagnrath, | if there from the floor

[10. This stanza sounds very much like many of those in the first part of the *Hovamol*, and may have been introduced here from some such source.

12. *Skinfaxi*: "Shining-Mane."]

{p. 72}

Thou wouldst thy wisdom make known:
What name has the steed | that from East anew
Brings night for the noble gods?"

Othin spake:
14. "Hrimfaxi name they | the steed that anew
Brings night for the noble gods;
Each morning foam | from his bit there falls,
And thence come the dews in the dales."

Vafthruthnir spake:
15. "Speak forth now, Gagnrath, | if there from the floor
Thou wouldst thy wisdom make known:
What name has the river | that 'twixt the realms
Of the gods and the giants goes?"

Othin spoke:
16. "Ifing is the river | that 'twixt the realms
Of the gods and the giants goes;
For all time ever | open it flows,
No ice on the river there is."

Vafthruthnir spake:
17. "Speak forth now, Gagnrath, | if there from the floor

[13. Here, and in general throughout the poem, the two-line introductory formulæ are abbreviated in the manuscripts.

14. *Hrimfaxi*: "Frosty-Mane."

16. *Ifing*: there is no other reference to this river, which never freezes, so that the giants cannot cross it.]

{p. 73}

Thou wouldst thy wisdom make known:
What name has the field | where in fight shall meet
Surt and the gracious gods?"

Othin spake:
18. "Vigrith is the field | where in fight shall meet
Surt and the gracious gods;
A hundred miles | each way does it measure.
And so are its boundaries set."

Vafthruthnir spake:
19. "Wise art thou, guest! | To my bench shalt thou go,
In our seats let us speak together;

Here in the hall | our heads, O guest,
Shall we wager our wisdom upon."

Othin spake:
20. "First answer me well, | if thy wisdom avails,
And thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
In earliest time | whence came the earth,
Or the sky, thou giant sage?"

[17. *Surt*: the ruler of the fire-world (Muspellsheim), who comes to attack the gods in the last battle; cf. Voluspo, 52.

18. *Vigrith*: "the Field of Battle." Snorri quotes this stanza. A hundred miles: a general phrase for a vast distance.

19. With this stanza Vafthruthnir, sufficiently impressed with his guest's wisdom to invite him to share his own seat, resigns the questioning to Othin.

20. The fragmentary version of this poem in the *Arnamagnæan Codex* begins in the middle of the first line of this stanza.]

{p. 74}

Vafthruthnir spake:
21. "Out of Ymir's flesh | was fashioned the earth,
And the mountains were made of his bones;
The sky from the frost-cold | giant's skull,
And the ocean out of his blood."

Othin spake:
22. "Next answer me well, | if thy wisdom avails,
And thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
Whence came the moon, | o'er the world of men
That fares, and the flaming sun?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
23. "Mundilferi is he | who begat the moon,
And fathered the flaming sun;
The round of heaven | each day they run,
To tell the time for men."

Othin spake:
24. "Third answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
Whence came the day, | o'er mankind that fares,
Or night with the narrowing moon?"

[21. Ymir: the giant out of whose body the gods made the world; cf. Voluspo, 3 and note.

22. In this and in Othin's following questions, both manuscripts replace the words "next," "third," "fourth," etc., by Roman numerals.

23. *Mundilferi* ("the Turner"?): known only as the father of Mani (the Moon) and Sol (the Sun). Note that, curiously {footnote p. 75} enough, Mani is the boy and Sol the girl. According to Snorri, Sol drove the horses of the sun, and Mani those of the moon, for the gods, indignant that they should have been given such imposing names, took them from their father to perform these tasks. Cf. *Grimnismol*, 37.]

{p. 75}

Vafthruthnir spake:
25. "The father of day | is Delling called,
And the night was begotten by Nor;
Full moon and old | by the gods were fashioned,
To tell the time for men."

Othin spake:
26. "Fourth answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
Whence did winter come, | or the summer warm,
First with the gracious gods?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
27. "Vindsval he was | who was winter's father,
And Svosuth summer begat;"
. . . . . .
. . . . . .

[25. *Delling* ("the Dayspring"? Probably another form of the name, Dogling, meaning "Son of the Dew" is more correct): the husband of Not (Night); their son was Dag (Day); cf. Hovamol, 161. Nor: Snorri calls the father of Night Norvi or Narfi, and puts him among the giants. Lines 3-4: cf. Voluspo, 6.

27. Neither the *Regius* nor the *Arnamagnæan Codex* indicates a lacuna. Most editors have filled out the stanza with two lines from late paper manuscripts: "And both of these shall ever be, / Till the gods to destruction go." Bugge ingeniously paraphrases Snorri's prose: "Vindsval's father was Vosuth called, / And rough is all his race." *Vindsval*: "the Wind-Cold," also called Vindljoni, "the Wind-Man." *Svosuth*: "the Gentle."]

{p. 76}

Othin spake:
28. "Fifth answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
What giant first | was fashioned of old,
And the eldest of Ymir's kin?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
29. "Winters unmeasured | ere earth was made
Was the birth of Bergelmir;

Thruthgelmir's son | was the giant strong,
And Aurgelmir's grandson of old."

Othin spake:
30. "Sixth answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
Whence did Aurgelmir come | with the giants' kin,
Long since, thou giant sage?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
31. "Down from Elivagar | did venom drop,
And waxed till a giant it was;

[28. *Ymir's kin*: the giants.

29. *Bergelmir*: when the gods slew Ymir in order to make the world out of his body, so much blood flowed from him that all the frost-giants were drowned except Bergelmir and his wife, who escaped in a boat; cf. stanza 35. Of *Thruthgelmir* ("the Mightily Burning") we know nothing, but Aurgelmir was the frost-giants' name for Ymir himself. Thus Ymir was the first of the giants, and so Othin's question is answered.

31. Snorri quotes {illegible}is stanza, and the last two lines are taken from his version, as both of the manuscripts omit them. *Elivagar* ("Stormy Waves"): Mogk suggests that this river may have been the Milky Way. At any rate, the venom carried in its waters {footnote p. 77} froze into ice-banks over Ginnunga-gap (the "yawning gap" referred to in *Voluspo*, 3), and then dripped down to make the giant Ymir.]

{p. 77}

And thence arose | our giants' race,
And thus so fierce are we found."

Othin spake:
32. "Seventh answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
How begat he children, | the giant grim,
Who never a giantess knew?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
33. "They say 'neath the arms | of the giant of ice
Grew man-child and maid together;
And foot with foot | did the wise one fashion
A son that six heads bore."

Othin spake:
34. "Eighth answer me well, | if wise thou art called,
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
What farthest back | dost thou bear in mind?
For wide is thy wisdom, giant!"

[33. Snorri gives, without materially elaborating on it, the same account of how Ymir's son and daughter were born under his left arm, and how his feet together created a son. That this offspring should have had six heads is nothing out of the ordinary, for various giants had more than the normal number, and Ymir's mother is credited with a little matter of nine hundred heads; cf. *Hymiskvitha*, 8. Of the career of Ymir's six headed son we know nothing; he may have been the Thruthgelmir of stanza 29.]

{p. 78}

Vafthruthnir spake:
35. "Winters unmeasured | ere earth was made
Was the birth of Bergelmir;
This first knew I well, | when the giant wise
In a boat of old was borne."

Othin spake:
36. "Ninth answer me well, | if wise thou art called
If thou knowest it, Vafthruthnir, now:
Whence comes the wind | that fares o'er the waves
Yet never itself is seen?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
37. "In an eagle's guise | at the end of heaven
Hræsvelg sits, they say;
And from his wings | does the wind come forth
To move o'er the world of men."

Othin spake:
38. "Tenth answer me now, | if thou knowest all
The fate that is fixed for the gods:

[35. Snorri quotes this stanza. *Bergelmir*: on him and his boat cf. stanza 29 and note.

37. Snorri quotes this stanza. *Hræsvelg* ("the Corpse-Eater") on this giant in eagle's form cf. Voluspo, So, and Skirnismol, 27.

38. With this stanza the question-formula changes, and Othin's questions from this point on concern more or less directly the great final struggle. Line 4 is presumably spurious. *Njorth*: on Njorth and the Wanes, who gave him as a hostage to the gods at the end of their war, cf. *Voluspo*, 21 and note.]

{p. 79}

Whence came up Njorth | to the kin of the gods,--
(Rich in temples | and shrines he rules,--)
Though of gods he was never begot?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
39. "In the home of the Wanes | did the wise ones create him,
And gave him as pledge to the gods;

At the fall of the world | shall he fare once more
Home to the Wanes so wise."

Othin spake:
40. "Eleventh answer me well, | . . . . . .
. . . . . .
What men . . . . . | in . . . . . home
Each day to fight go forth?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
41. "The heroes all | in Othin's hall
Each day to fight go forth;

[40. In both manuscripts, apparently through the carelessness of some older copyist, stanzas 40 and 41 are run together: "Eleventh answer me well, what men in the home mightily battle each day? They fell each other, and fare from the fight all healed full soon to sit." Luckily Snorri quotes stanza 41 in full, and the translation is from his version. Stanza 40 should probably run something like this: "Eleventh answer me well, if thou knowest all / The fate that is fixed for the gods: / What men are they who in Othin's home / Each day to fight go forth?"

41. *The heroes*: those brought to Valhall by the Valkyries. After the day's fighting they are healed of their wounds and all feast together.]

{p. 80}

They fell each other, | and fare from the fight
All healed full soon to sit."

Othin spake:
42. "Twelfth answer me now | how all thou knowest
Of the fate that is fixed for the gods;
Of the runes of the gods | and the giants' race
The truth indeed dost thou tell,
(And wide is thy wisdom, giant!)"

Vafthruthnir spake:
43. "Of the runes of the gods | and the giants' race
The truth indeed can I tell,
(For to every world have I won;)
To nine worlds came I, | to Niflhel beneath,
The home where dead men dwell."

Othin spake:
44. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got of the gods:
What shall live of mankind | when at last there comes
The mighty winter to men?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
45. "In Hoddmimir's wood | shall hide themselves
Lif and Lifthrasir then;

[43. Nine worlds: cf. *Voluspo*, 2. *Niflhel*: "Dark-Hell."

44. The mighty winter: Before the final destruction three winters follow one another with no intervening summers.

45. Snorri quotes this stanza. Hoddmimir's wood: probably {footnote p. 81} this is the ash-tree Yggdrasil, which is sometimes referred to as "Mimir's Tree," because Mimir waters it from his well; cf. *Voluspo*, 27 and note, and *Svipdagsmol*, 30 and note. *Hoddmimir* is presumably another name for Mimir. *Lif* ("Life") and *Lifthrasir* ("Sturdy of Life"?): nothing further is known of this pair, from whom the new race of men is to spring.]

{p. 81}

The morning dews | for meat shall they have,
Such food shall men then find."

Othin spake:
46. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got of the gods:
Whence comes the sun | to the smooth sky back,
When Fenrir has snatched it forth?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
47. "A daughter bright | Alfrothul bears
Ere Fenrir snatches her forth;
Her mother's paths | shall the maiden tread
When the gods to death have gone."

Othin spake:
48. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got of the gods:
What maidens are they, | so wise of mind.
That forth o'er the sea shall fare?"

[46. *Fenrir*: there appears to be a confusion between the wolf Fenrir (cf. *Voluspo*, 39 and note) and his son, the wolf Skoll, who steals the sun (cf. *Voluspo*, 40 and note).

47. Snorri quotes this stanza. *Alfrothul* ("the Elf-Beam") the sun.]

{p. 82}

Vafthruthnir spake:
49. "O'er Mogthrasir's hill | shall the maidens pass,
And three are their throngs that come;

They all shall protect | the dwellers on earth,
Though they come of the giants' kin."

Othin spake:
50. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got of the gods:
Who then shall rule | the realm of the gods,
When the fires of Surt have sunk?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
51. "In the gods' home Vithar | and Vali shall dwell,
When the fires of Surt have sunk;
Mothi and Magni | shall Mjollnir have
When Vingnir falls in fight."

Othin spake:
52. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got of the gods:

[49. *Mogthrasir* ("Desiring Sons"): not mentioned elsewhere in the Eddic poems, or by Snorri. *The maidens*: apparently Norns, like the "giant-maids" in *Voluspo*, 8. These Norns, how ever, are kindly to men.

50. *Surt*: cf. *Voluspo*, 52 and note.

51. *Vithar*: a son of Othin, who slays the wolf Fenrir; cf. *Voluspo*, 54 and note. *Vali*: the son whom Othin begot to avenge Baldr's death; cf. *Voluspo*, 33 and note. *Mothi* ("Wrath") and *Magni* ("Might"): the sons of the god Thor, who after his death inherit his famous hammer, *Mjollnir*. Concerning this hammer cf. especially *Thrymskvitha*, *passim. Vingnir* ("the {footnote p. 83} Hurler"): Thor. Concerning his death cf. *Voluspo*, 56. This stanza is quoted by Snorri.]

{p. 83}

What shall bring the doom | of death to Othin,
When the gods to destruction go?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
53. "The wolf shall fell | the father of men,
And this shall Vithar avenge;
The terrible jaws | shall he tear apart,
And so the wolf shall he slay."

Othin spake:
54. "Much have I fared, | much have I found,
Much have I got from the gods:
What spake Othin himself | in the ears of his son,
Ere in the bale-fire he burned?"

Vafthruthnir spake:
55. "No man can tell | what in olden time
Thou spak'st in the ears of thy son;
With fated mouth | the fall of the gods
And mine olden tales have I told;
With Othin in knowledge | now have I striven,
And ever the wiser thou art."

[53. *The wolf*: Fenrir; cf. *Voluspo*, 53 and 54.

54. *His son*: Baldr. Bugge changes lines 3-4 to run: "What did Othin speak | in the ear of Baldr, / When to the bale-fire they bore him?" For Baldr's death cf. *Voluspo*, 3a and note. The question is, of course, unanswerable save by Othin himself, and so the giant at last recognizes his guest.

55. *Fated*: in stanza 19 Vafthruthnir was rash enough to wager his head against his guest's on the outcome of the contest of wisdom, so he knows that his defeat means his death.]